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Affairs of State, by Stewart Alsop

China—a smell of madness

WASHINGTON:

The professional China-watchers in Hong Kong study with agonizing care every scrap of evidence bearing on the mental and physical condition of Mao Tse-tung. For example, motion pictures of all telecasts from Peking are taken, and the frames showing Mao are enlarged and examined in the most minute detail. As a result of this sort of detective work, the China-watchers from the State Department and the CIA are convinced that something is very wrong with China's ruler. They suspect that Mao, at 73, suffers from some sort of circulatory trouble which intermittently interrupts the flow of blood to his brain.

"He will be moving and smiling with some animation, and then suddenly he will stop dead, and his face will go absolutely blank, like a zombie's," one China-watcher recently told this reporter in Hong Kong. Others believe that Mao is suffering from some progressive disease, probably cancer, which affects his speech—for many months he has not uttered more than a few words in public.

As for his mental state, the picture that emerges of Mao is of a sort of Chinese King Lear—a sick, increasingly irrational, unhappy old man; once an undoubted genius, failing now in body and mind, cut off from his old comrades save for a few sycophants, and filled, like Lear, with a terrible sense of betrayal; more even than most old, sick men, a prisoner of his past; and thus, as his old enemy Nikita Khrushchev said of him, "out of touch with reality."

There is, in short, a smell of near-madness about Mao, as there was about Lear ("O fool, I shall go mad"). But unlike Lear, Mao remains immensely powerful, the idolized ruler of the world's most populous nation, now armed with about 50 nuclear weapons. And the smell of near-madness that emanates from the pudgy, moon-faced figure of Mao Tse-tung emanates also from the nation he rules.

The deification of Mao has been carried to lengths undreamed of by Hitler or Stalin, and it produces all sorts of pathological symptoms. These seem at first glance more ludicrous than sinister, as pathological symptoms often do. Consider, for example, the following paragraph from the official English-language account of Mao's famous swim in the Yangtze, distributed by the Chinese propaganda center in Hong Kong:

"Nieh Chang-sin, a swimmer from the militia of the Hankow Power Plant, became so excited when he saw Chairman Mao that he forgot he was in the water. Raising both hands, he shouted 'Long live Chairman Mao! Long live Chairman Mao!' While trying to leap up, he sank into the river and gulped several mouthfuls, but the water tasted especially sweet to him."

This nonsense arouses the suspicion of a sly and subversive sense of humor at work. But no, the China-watchers insist, it is meant to be taken—and is taken—with a breathless seriousness. The Chinese press is full of straight-faced accounts of athletes, well-diggers, and even night-soil carriers who, inspired by reading *The Thoughts of Mao Tse-tung*, win impossible victories, dig wells of incredible depth, and carry astonishing loads of night soil.

A small red booklet containing *The Thoughts of Mao Tse-tung* has been printed in China in the hundreds of millions. Read in translation, it turns out to be the most fatuous collection of inspirational clichés produced since the founder of this magazine wrote *Poor Richard's Almanack*. A few excerpts: "Unity, alertness, earnestness, and liveliness." "Study diligently, and make progress every day." "Be resolute, and unafraid of sacrifice; surmount every difficulty to win victory."

The whole book is like that, and yet it is treated in China as a sort of combination prayer book and magic amulet. The Japanese press carried the story of the final round between the Japanese and Chinese lady Ping-Pong champions. The Chinese lady won the first game, but lost the second. To prepare for the third and final game, she retired into a corner and spent 10 minutes in prayerful perusal of *The Thoughts of Mao Tse-tung*. Then she returned to the table—and lost.

It is tempting to dismiss this sort of thing with a snicker. But its unlaughable aspects are suggested by the real nature of the struggle between Mao Tse-tung and the "pragmatists" he is trying to purge. The whole story of the struggle is immensely complex. But all the China-watchers agree that it began to come to a crisis when the United States intervened in force in Vietnam early in 1965.

Mao had flatly predicted that the American "paper tiger" would never send troops to Viet-